



Best Practices in Working with Girls

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PACER CENTER



PACER Center JJ Project

- PACER Center is a national parent information and training center (www.pacer.org)
- The Juvenile Justice project began in 1994
- First in country to address mental health disability issues as a risk for involvement in juvenile justice systems
- Provide advocacy, training, information and develop resources for parents and professionals



Girls in JJ

- 60% of all arrests of girls are runaways
- Girls usually experience victimization before they commit their first offense
- African American and Latina girls are overrepresented
- Trauma is the leading pathway into corrections (typically status offenses, runaway, prostitution, substance abuse and aggression)
- More than 75% of girls have mental health issues (nearly three times as high as boys)
- Most girls engage in offending when they reach adolescence
- Relational aggression (fighting, bullying) is highest in girls
- Have poor attachment to school



What About Girls?

- Most studies are about boys yet.....
- Girls are the fastest growing segment in JJ;
- Even violent offenses have been rising as compared with boys
- Many risk factors are the same for girls and boys but why do they affect girls differently?
- Regardless of race, all girls in JJ have a higher rate of serious mental health issues (depression, self injury, suicide attempts, etc.) than boys
- Female delinquency in itself may be a symptom of mental illness
- In girls the important thing to remember is relationships...
- They are key to their problems as well as a key to their survival;



What About Girls?

- Girls are more affected by chaos and poor parenting than boys
- Girls are more influenced by their romantic partners who commit crime than boys
- Lack of empathy is more prevalent in girls than boys (a result of their challenges with attachment)



Consequences of Female Offending

- Higher mortality rates, violent relationships, less steady work, poor physical health
- Higher rate of school dropout, poor social, verbal and language skills, limited education, and skill attainment
- Emotional disorders, depression and substance abuse
- Higher rates of dependence on county services, child abuse, abuse by and against partners,
- Have children at younger ages with equally unstable partner(s)
- Some young women go on to be more abusive towards partners than males



The Connection with Biology and Girls' Brains

- Girls respond differently to exposure to stress, abuse, and emotional disorders; brain studies show the impact of trauma and depression is different in girls
- Biology affects their response to all risk factors
- Stress increases risk for poor outcomes because of the impact on brain development



Brain Development and Stressors

- Stressors like abuse affect the brain in many ways
- Ability to accurately interpret social cues..Interpret conflict as hostile or threatening rather than only a different opinion
- Increase likelihood of mental illness, drug use,
- Cause fewer “filters”, fewer inhibitions, and a negative effect on brain development
- Girls may act like they don’t care (a learned response to abuse and emotional neglect)
- Are less able to regulate emotions and become unmotivated



Impact of Puberty

- Early puberty: Greater risk because their physical development is more rapid and profound while their emotional development and cognitive skills remain immature
- A girl who has significant interaction with adult males will enter puberty earlier than juvenile females who are not socially overexposed to adult males.
- More risk taking poor self control, and fewer problem solving skills or understanding consequences



Girls Needs are Defined by Relationships

- Girls define themselves in relationships to other people
- Boys define themselves in relationship to the world
- We need to help girls to understand what healthy relationships are and how to avoid toxic relationships



Protective Factors For Girls Who Experience Trauma

- The knowledge that there are adults in their life who care (most consistent)
- The ability to have some success and connectedness in school (a safe place)
- Environments that promote academic and behavioral goals
- The presence of a safe environment



How can this information Inform Treatment in the JJ System?

- We need to address multiple needs :
- Physical health, Relationships; Sexual, Intellectual Spiritual, Emotional
- Promote self-knowledge, awareness, and identity
- Strength based, and focused on understanding their personal story
- Acknowledge their experiences; address the impact of life experiences to their impact on emotions
- Promote recovery from trauma, and re-educate girls about strategies to ensure safety
- Plan for the future-healing and scripted responses



Challenges

- No reliable risk assessment tools for girls
- Girls less likely to complete treatment and refuse to attend out-patient treatment
- Appropriate community-based services are scarce
- Gender specific treatments **MUST** address multiple aspects in their life
- Need safety and **continued** and consistent supports in the community



Triggers to Trauma

- Cuffs, shackles and restraints
- Searches and clothing removal
- Lack of autonomy
- Lack of privacy
- Isolation
- Authoritarian control and threats of violence
- Critical incidents and institutional responses *

* Bonita Vescey



Don't's

- Expect girls to share their stories before you establish trust and show compassion
- Lecture girls; it's a huge turnoff
- Never lie to them or break promises
- Tell them you know what's best for them
- Focus only on their violations.. Look at the reasons for their behaviors
- Do.....
- Help them to understand the source and impact of their behaviors on themselves and others
- Don't give up on them.. They may test you but hang in there...*

* adapted from Paula Schaefer



Female Responsive Facility Needs

- Safe and secure placements
- Suicide resistant (most attempts take place in bedrooms or bathrooms)
- Opportunities for meeting with staff and families in safe, family friendly and private areas
- Alternatives to strip searches, and other humiliating experiences that mirror their own experiences
- Training for male and female staff about triggers that are unique to women



Delaware Girls Wrap Around Program Model

- Cross system collaboration (includes teen clinic, family medicine, YMCA,)
- Advocacy and Training for professionals
- Trauma recovery and focus on the future
- Home based services and linkage to community services
- www.delawaregirlsinitiative.org



Girls Need:

- To have healthy role models and allies
 - To be able to trust, love, and respect
 - To feel valued and competent
 - To understand what healthy sexuality means
- They need to understand how to avoid those relationships that are unhealthy and how to nurture new ones.**


